DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 029 EC 302 479

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TITLE Question #2: Is Collaborative Consultation Non-Directive?
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (71st, San Antonio, TX, April 5-9, 1993).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consultants; Consultation Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; Helping Relationship; Information Seeking; *Interaction Process Analysis; *Interprofessional Relationship; Interviews; Leadership; *Regular and Special Education Relationship; Special Education Teachers; *Special Needs Students
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Collaboration

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the empirical research on the nature of the consultant-consultee relationship within school based consultation programs. It finds that the fundamental assumption of collaborative consultation, that both consultant and consultee are equal partners, is rarely the case. Specifically, it finds that the effective consultant controls the interview direction, with the consultee tending to follow the consultant's conversational lead. In situations where the consultee attempts to control the direction of the interview, negative outcomes usually result. (Contains 14 references.) (DB)

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Question #2: Is Collaborative Consultation Non-Directive?

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In D. Fuchs (Chair), Questioning popular beliefs about collaborative consultation. Symposium presented at the meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children, San Antonio, TX, April 5-9, 1993.

EC 302479

Abstract

A fundamental assumption of collaborative consultation is that both consultant and consultee are equal partners in the process. Though aesthetically appealing, social power analyses of actual consultation interviews suggest otherwise. Specifically, the effective consultant typically controls the interview direction, and the consultee tends to follow the consultant's conversational lead. Moreover, consultee attempts to control the direction of the interview often result in negative outcomes. This paper reviews some pertinent empirical research and examines the nature of the consultant-consultee relationship within school-based consultation.

Question #2: Is Collaborative Consultation Non-Directive?

Introduction and Background

It was not only a good idea that this symposium started with the definitional confusion surrounding collaborative consultation; rather, it was essential that it begin there. In fact, we could profitably spend the remainder of this symposium refining what is meant by the term, "collaborative consultation." Understanding collaborative consultation has been particularly frustrating for me, because, after reading books by Caplan (1970), Bergan (1977), and others, I thought I understood what "consultation" is. Also, after reading the work of Caplan (Caplan & Caplan, 1993), Pryzwansky (1974, 1977), and a recent book co-authored by panel member Marilyn Friend (Friend & Cook, 1992), I thought I understood what "collaboration" is. However, "collaborative consultation" remains a very fuzzy concept for me. Is it consultation (as I understand the term), or a unique new form of consultation? Is it collaboration (as I understand the term), or a variation on collaboration? Or, is it none of the above?

If you can identify with my confusion, perhaps you can see why I have not permitted graduate students to use the term "collaborative consultation" while enrolled in my course in consultation theory and methods. In my opinion, the use of the term "collaborative consultation" needlessly compounds the confusion already associated with the slippery terms "consultation" and "collaboration." In making this point, I am

reinforcing Kratochwill's (1991) recent call for clearer definitions of constructs used in consultation research.

Unfortunately, in order to talk about some research that has relevance to understanding the nature of collaborative consultation, we need to pin down some of its identifying characteristics. Based on my reading of the book Collaborative Consultation by Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin (1986), I note many of the same characteristics found in school-based behavioral consultation as described by Bergan (1977) and Bergan and Kratochwill (1990). Some of these shared features are: the triadic model; problem-solving focus; implementation considerations; basis in behavioral theory; and clear emphases placed on reinforcement principles, functional analysis, and consultant interviewing skills.

On the other hand, it seems that collaborative consultation emphasizes aspects of the consultant-consultee relationship (such as equality) more than behavioral consultation does, at least in the descriptions provided by Idol et al. and Bergan. In the practice of behavioral consultation, however, I have found nearly all school-based behavioral consultants to be attuned to relationship issues, if only for pragmatic reasons. Most consultants understand that behavioral technology alone is often insufficient to produce lasting, positive changes in consultee and client behavior. It also has become increasingly important for the behavioral consultant to understand the consultee's perspective completely, to involve the consultee as a co-equal

partner in the problem-solving process, and--yes--occasionally even to share ownership of the presenting problem and its solution.

These parallels between behavioral consultation and what I believe to be collaborative consultation have been drawn in order to address Question #2: Is collaborative consultation non-directive? To the extent there is overlap between the practice of behavioral consultation and collaborative consultation, there are some limited data available to answer this question.

Before talking about two specific studies, I would like to briefly provide some background information. For about the past 10 years, I have studied what is said in school-based consultation interviews. I have listened to several hundred audiotaped interviews, and have read a comparable number of verbatim transcripts. I have coded the verbal interactions on a message-by-message basis using several different coding systems. The construct studied most often has been social power, because there is much evidence to suggest that power plays a significant role in many human relationships, including school-based consultation. Finally, I have tried to link indicators of social power to consultation outcomes.

Let me proceed by describing two of these studies.

Study 1: Erchul (1987)

The first study, entitled "A Relational Communication Analysis of Control in School Consultation" was published in 1987 in Professional School Psychology (now School Psychology

Quarterly). In this study, I used a verbal interaction coding system to analyze eight consultant/consultee dyads across the three behavioral consultation interviews (PII, PAI, and PEI) (Bergan, 1977).

The coding system employed was a version of Rogers and Farace's (1975) relational communication coding scheme (R-F). In general, relational communication coding schemes assess power process or interpersonal control--message exchanges through which influence is exerted, accepted, or rejected. The R-F, developed originally by speech communication researchers to study interpersonal control in marital dyads, focuses on: (a) the form (or process) of spoken messages rather than their content, and (b) paired sequential messages (or transactions) rather than single messages.

Within the R-F code, the smallest unit of analysis is the message--a speaking turn of any length beginning with Person A's first word and continuing until Person B speaks. Using the R-F, coding from verbatim transcripts and/or audiotapes proceeds in 3 phases:

1. Each message is assigned a 3-digit code. The first digit indicates the speaker (e.g., consultant, consultee) and the second digit specifies the grammatical form of the message (e.g., assertion, question). The third digit indicates the metacommunicational function the message serves relative to the message that came before it (e.g., instruction, order, answer, or topic change).

2. Each message receives a control code based on second and third digit code combinations [see Rogers & Farace (1975) for specific control code assignments]. There are three control codes: (1) "one-up," an attempt to control the relationship; (2) "one-down," an acceptance of or a request for the other person to control the relationship; and (3) "one-across," a neutral message considered to have no implications for relational control.

3. Control codes are tabulated individually to create variables for study. Two primary variables derived from the R-F are domineeringness and dominance. Domineeringness for Person A is defined as the number of A's one-up messages divided by the total number of A's messages. Dominance for Person A is the proportion of one-down messages given by Person B to all one-up messages given by A. More generally, a high dominance score denotes an interpersonal relationship in which one person frequently accepts the other's conversational direction. It is critical to note that dominance depends on both members of the dyad for its definition; A is dominant because B accepts A's attempts to control the relationship.

After coding the 24 interviews, results indicated that:

1. consultants controlled the relationship throughout its duration (i.e., consultants had higher domineeringness and dominance scores);

2. consultants having high dominance scores were judged to be more effective by consultees (r = .65); and

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3. consultees with high domineeringness scores were judged by consultants as less likely to collect baseline data (r = -.81).

Study 2: Erchul and Chewning (1990)

The second study is one conducted by Teri Chewning and me that was published in 1990 in School Psychology Quarterly. Here, ten consultants worked with one consultee each across the three behavioral consultation interviews (PII, PAI, and PEI). All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded using a second coding scheme.

This study used Folger and Puck's (1976) relational communication coding system (F-P). Developed by speech communication researchers, the F-P system considers only requests and responses to these requests rather than all verbal messages. Coding only request/response transactions ensures that information about the interaction will be obtained because every request demands some type of response. Specifically:

1. The F-P codes person A's requests or "bids" (e.g., questions, instructions, orders) and person B's responses to these requests (e.g., acceptance, rejection, evasion).

2. Requests are coded as (a) dominant or submissive and (b) affiliative or hostile based on what person A has asked for and how it was phrased.

3. Responses to requests are then coded as accepted, rejected, or evaded based on person B's reply.

Because most bid/response transactions constitute questions followed by answers, the F-P seems appropriate for analyzing the

process of consultation. Toward that end, Teri Chewning and I applied the F-P code to study school-based behavioral consultation. Of the almost 7,500 total messages contained in the 30 interviews, 1,074 request/response transactions were coded. Results indicated that:

1. consultees could be characterized as passive and accepting within the relationship, given their initiation of relatively few requests but many acceptance responses given to consultant requests;

2. consultants controlled the relationship through their frequent initiation of requests; and

3. the frequency of consultees' requests made during the initial interview had a negative association with favorable consultation outcomes, such as perceptions of consultant effectiveness and consultee participation in baseline data collection. Given these findings we argued "for school-based behavioral consultation as more accurately involving a 'cooperative,' rather than 'collaborative,' relationship wherein the consultee follows the lead of the consultant" (p. 15).

Conclusions

Question #2 was, "Is collaborative consultation non-directive?" Given the studies reported, I would like to re-phrase this question. I propose that this question read, "Is successful collaborative consultation non-directive?" Again, to the extent there is overlap between the practice of behavioral consultation and collaborative consultation, the current answer to this

question is "No." The results of both investigations suggest that the effective consultant is directive in terms of conversational control. Moreover, the two studies also indicate that the more directive the consultee, the less successful the consultation experience.

I know that some of my colleagues and students and have found these results and corresponding conclusions to be very unsatisfying. After all, aren't we supposed to help, and even empower, consultees instead of dominate them? I have commented on this issue in a recent column appearing in the Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation (Erchul, 1992). Some skeptics may find it reassuring to know that, despite the available evidence indicating that the effective consultant largely controls the direction, pace, and content of the consultation interview, no social contract has been broken. Quite the contrary--one has been upheld, in that consultants' actions have resulted in improved outcomes for consultees and/or their clients.

In conclusion, either implicitly or explicitly, consultants and consultees negotiate their working relationships. Although it makes us all feel good to think that equality exists in consultation, there is research suggesting that one party (consultant) leads while the other party (consultee) follows. Moreover, indicators of this complementary relationship often are correlated with positive outcomes.

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